

What Is Osteoarthritis?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

Osteoarthritis is a joint disease that mostly affects cartilage. Cartilage is the slippery tissue that covers the ends of bones in a joint. Healthy cartilage allows bones to glide over each other. It also helps absorb shock of movement. In osteoarthritis, the top layer of cartilage breaks down and wears away. This allows bones under the cartilage to rub together. The rubbing causes pain, swelling, and loss of motion of the joint. Over time, the joint may lose its normal shape. Also, bone spurs may grow on the edges of the joint. Bits of bone or cartilage can break off and float inside the joint space, which causes more pain and damage.

People with osteoarthritis often have joint pain and reduced motion. Unlike some other forms of arthritis, osteoarthritis affects only joints and not internal organs. Rheumatoid arthritis – the second most common form of arthritis – affects other parts of the body besides the joints. Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis.

Who Gets Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis occurs most often in older people. Younger people sometimes get osteoarthritis primarily from joint injuries.

What Causes Osteoarthritis?

The cause of osteoarthritis is unknown. Factors that might cause it include:

- Being overweight
- Getting older
- Joint injury
- Stresses on the joints from certain jobs and playing sports.

How Is Osteoarthritis Diagnosed?

Osteoarthritis can occur in any joint. It occurs most often in the hands, knees, hips, and spine.

Warning signs of osteoarthritis are:

- Steady or on-and-off pain in a joint
- Stiffness in a joint after getting out of bed or sitting for a long time
- Swelling or tenderness in one or more joints
- A crunching feeling or the sound of bone rubbing on bone.

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No single test can diagnose osteoarthritis. Most doctors use several methods to diagnose the disease and rule out other problems:

- Medical history
- Physical exam
- X rays
- Other tests such as blood tests or exams of the fluid in the joints.

How Is Osteoarthritis Treated?

Doctors often combine treatments to fit a patient's needs, lifestyle, and health. Osteoarthritis treatment has four main goals:

- Improve joint care through rest and exercise
- Keep a healthy body weight
- Control pain
- Achieve a healthy lifestyle.

Osteoarthritis treatment plans can involve:

- Exercise
- Weight control
- Rest and joint care
- Pain relief
- Medicines
- Alternative therapies
- Surgery.

How Can Self-Care and a “Good-Health Attitude” Help?

Three kinds of programs help people learn about osteoarthritis and self-care and improve their good-health attitude:

- Patient education programs
- Arthritis self-management programs
- Arthritis support groups.

These programs teach people about osteoarthritis and its treatments. They also have clear and long-lasting benefits. People in these programs learn to:

- Exercise and relax
- Talk with their doctor or other health care providers
- Solve problems.

People with osteoarthritis find that self-management programs help them:

- Understand the disease
- Reduce pain while staying active
- Cope with their body, mind, and emotions
- Have more control over the disease
- Live an active, independent life.

People with a good-health attitude:

- Focus on what they can do, not what they can't do
- Focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses
- Break down activities into small tasks that are easy to manage
- Build fitness and healthy eating into their daily routines
- Develop ways to lower and manage stress
- Balance rest with activity
- Develop a support system of family, friends, and health care providers.

What Research Is Being Done on Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is not simply a disease of “wear and tear” that happens in joints as people get older. There is more to the disease than aging alone. Researchers are studying:

- Tools to detect osteoarthritis earlier
- Genes
- Tissue engineering
- A wide range of treatment strategies
- Osteoarthritis in animals
- Pain relief medicines
- Medicines to prevent joint damage
- Acupuncture
- Vitamins and other supplements
- Injection of hyaluronic acid (a natural part of cartilage and joint fluid)
- Estrogen.

For More Information on Osteoarthritis and Other Related Conditions:

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The information in this publication was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Osteoarthritis: Handout on Health full-text version, please contact NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit <http://www.niams.nih.gov>.